CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING SOCIAL ACTION AND COOPERATION

I WHAT IS COOPERATION?

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It is a commonplace to say that human beings are social and are disposed to cooperate. We have learned from biology and ethology that such factors as “kin-altruism” and “reciprocal altruism” can ground cooperative behavior in animals. Analogously, we think that people are disposed to behave cooperatively at least with respect to their kin and, perhaps by a kind of extension, friends and other close group members and, in the case of moral people, with all human beings. (We could term this “friendship” or “we-ness” cooperation.) We also think that people often cooperate with strangers in terms of reciprocal exchange in business and related contexts (“exchange cooperation”). While a general, biologically based disposition to cooperate can perhaps be seen to exist in human beings, it is not that easy to specify under what conditions people actually cooperate rather than defect, act competitively, selfishly, or even aggressively. These latter kinds of behavior are all in their different ways opposite to cooperation, and people seem also to be disposed to such behaviors. It is surely of interest to investigate deeper the nature of cooperation and especially the conditions and circumstances that make it feasible for people to cooperate.

It can also be argued that it is a necessary feature of human beings – qua thinkers and agents conceived in terms of the “conceptual framework of agency” – that they are social and to some extent cooperative. At least this sociality assumption is a general presupposition underlying any person’s thinking and action on the whole, although in actual practice this presumption may be retracted from on particular occasions. A central argument for this sociality view goes in terms of the assumption that human beings conceived as thinking and acting persons necessarily are language users. As language necessarily is based on shared meanings and shared uses, we arrive at the sociality view, or its presupposition version, of human beings.

One of the central ideas of this book is that collective reasons, primarily ones related to common goals and practices or to morality (e.g., to the requirement of being helpful and cooperative), are in many cases required to account for cooperation. Collective reasons, being opposed to selfish and self-centered
reasons, seem primarily to be due to education and related environmental factors or are based on or relate to what institutional authorities (be they persons, bodies of persons, or norms) require and expect to be realized. Needless to say, there are lots of institutional practices which are cooperative or have significant cooperative elements – think, e.g., of the practices related to teaching, business, religion, and science. Collective reasons for cooperation can be thought to underlie these institutional practices, and the same goes for cooperation on a larger scale, especially international cooperation in its various forms.

In the present philosophical work, my aim is to give a well-grounded and informative answer to the problems of what the basic features of cooperation are and what kinds of cooperation there are. Using the conceptual resources of this book, I will investigate under which circumstances and with what kinds of motivational grounds it is rational or useful (etc.) to cooperate. In addition, the problem of the possibility of achieving and maintaining social order will be discussed from a philosopher’s point of view. These problems can be and have been addressed by social scientists, biologists, and game-theorists; and my account will attempt to take into account these discussions. Cooperation is a truly interdisciplinary topic and one with great importance for practical life.

In this introductory chapter I will start with some general remarks on cooperation and then proceed to a preliminary discussion of social action with cooperative features. I will illustrate cooperation in terms of examples and introduce some technical notions, but specific analyses and discussions will be deferred to later chapters. My approach to cooperation is based on a philosophical theory of social action. It is argued that cooperative acting together forms the core of full-blown cooperative action. The term ‘g-cooperation’ will be used for this kind of cooperation (or, more precisely, for cooperation based on a shared collective goal of a strong kind): it is cooperation based on the “group-mode” (or, synonymously, “we-mode,” to be discussed in Chapter 2). This view will be called the collective goal theory of cooperation. In addition, one may speak of cooperation also in weaker senses. Thus, for instance, cooperation in collective action dilemmas such as in Prisoner’s Dilemma type of situations is shown to be weak cooperation to be called “i-cooperation” (and to be analyzed in terms of the notion of “compatible coaction”). This latter kind of cooperation is based on the participants’ private or “I-mode” preferences and goals. A goal-based account of i-cooperation will also be given in the book.

What has been said of cooperation in philosophical and scientific and other relevant literature? While there is no need here to give a fully satisfactory answer to this question, a reader may still be interested in some kind of overview, even if partial and incomplete. I will below consider the matter briefly